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FATHER WILBUR AND HIS WORK.*

BY WM. D. FENTON.

James H. Wilbur, familiarly and affectionately known as Father Wilbur, was born on a farm near the village of Lowville, N. Y., September 11, 1811; was married to Lucretia Ann Stevens, March 9, 1831, and died at Walla Walla, Wash., October 8, 1887, in his 77th year. These three events, as related to his individual life, were the most important, his birth, his marriage and his death. The task of the biographer merges and enlarges itself into the work of the historian. The simple and short narrative common to the lives of most men and women concerns but few, and it is only when a life in its larger development has touched closely the affairs of men and has caused, or been a part of, the times that the narrative becomes historical.

Wilbur was the son of Presbyterian parents, but did not himself become identified with any church until after his marriage, when he and his wife were converted and became members of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the village of Lowville, N. Y. At the age of 29 years the presiding elder of his district, William S. Bowdish, granted to him a license as an exhorter, in accordance with the customs and usages of the church at that time, and within two years thereafter Aaron Adams, as presiding elder, granted him the usual license to preach, and in July, 1832, he became a member of the Black River General Conference and entered upon his life work as a Methodist minister. It is recorded that he traveled the circuit of Northern New York until he was called to this then remote field of his future labors, the Oregon Country. George Gary was then superintendent of the Oregon mission, and was a former presiding elder over Mr. Wilbur in the Black

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River Conference. On September 27, 1846, in company with William Roberts, who had been appointed superintendent of the mission, he sailed from New York on the bark *Whitton*, coming by way of Cape Horn to the Columbia River, and landed at Oregon City, June 22, 1847.

You will recall that the treaty of Washington was signed June 15, 1846, by which the United States and Great Britain settled the Oregon boundary, and although a provisional government had been established for the government of the then Oregon country, it was not until August 14, 1848, that the Congress of the United States created a territorial government embracing this vast region of country between the 42d and 49th parallels and the Pacific Ocean on the west, and the Rocky Mountains on the east. James K. Polk was President of the United States, and James Buchanan was Secretary of State, and acted as plenipotentiary for the United States, exchanging ratification of the treaty of Washington with Richard Packenham, representing Her Majesty, Queen Victoria. Wilbur and Roberts arrived 13 years after Jason Lee had established the Methodist Mission a few miles north of Salem, but Wilbur and Roberts came, not so much to extend and enlarge the work begun by Lee in an effort to bring religion and civilization to the Indians in this section, but rather to establish the foundation of a Christian civilization in this far-off country by the establishment of missions and churches and schools for our own people, who were then in increasing numbers coming to this section. Some of his co-workers of that early date who have left their impress upon the institutions of the church and of the state, were David Leslie, George Gary, A. F. Waller, Gustavus Hines, William Roberts and T. F. Royal, all of whom have passed away excepting Thomas F. Royal. Wilbur's only daughter was the wife of Rev. St. Michael Fackler, first Episcopal clergyman in the Oregon Country. Mr. Fackler was a native of Staunton, Va. He resided on a farm near Butteville, Marion County, for a time, and conducted services at Champoeg, Butteville, String-

town, Oregon City, Portland and on the Tualatin Plains. He married Miss Wilbur in 1849, and she died in 1850, and was buried in the lot in the rear of where Taylor Street Church now stands. She left an only child and daughter, who survived her but 11 years. Father Wilbur's wife died at Walla Walla, September 13, 1887, in her 76th year, and thus, upon the death of Father Wilbur, no lineal descendant of his family survived. He and his wife were buried in Lee Mission Cemetery, near Salem, Oregon.

When Wilbur arrived in Portland in June, 1847, there were 13 houses in a dense forest, where now stands a city of nearly 250,000 people, and at that time Salem and Oregon City were the chief centers of business and population and influence. Salem was but a missionary point in a country inhabited chiefly by Indians; Oregon City was a trading post with a few hundred population, and Portland did not exist as a municipality. In 1849 Wilbur was appointed to the circuit embracing Oregon City and Portland, and in 1850 built the first church in this city. It is estimated that the parsonage and church so constructed cost \$5,000; mechanics received \$12 per day, and lumber was \$120 per thousand. The first sermon was preached in this city by William Roberts, then living at Oregon City, and the services were held in a cooper shop on the west side of First street, between Morrison and Yamhill. This was on the first Sunday in November, 1847. It is recorded that on the preceding Sunday Rev. C. O. Hosford rode to a point on the east side of the river, and was ferried across the stream by James B. Stephens, in an Indian canoe, and landed at what is now the foot of Stark street; that he clambered up the muddy bank and entered a dense forest of fir, and looking southward, entered an opening in the woods, crawling under and climbing over newly cut logs. At that time this pioneer preacher, who had been sent by Superintendent Roberts to arrange a religious service, found scattered about 14 log cabins and a few families. This was on the last Sunday of October, 1847, and on the succeeding Sunday William

Roberts held the first religious services and preached the first sermon in what is now the city of Portland, and James H. Wilbur preached the first sermon in Taylor Street Church in the spring of 1850.

Until the General Conference of 1848, Oregon had been considered a foreign mission, but during the session of that body in May of that year, in Pittsburg, Pa., the Board of Bishops were charged to organize during the quadrennium, what was to be called the "Oregon and California Mission Conference," and the territory to be embraced therein was to include all that portion of the United States west of the Rocky Mountains. California, as a result of the war with Mexico in 1846, had been added to the territorial possessions of the United States. The Oregon country, comprising now the states of Oregon, Washington, Idaho, the western half of Montana and a portion of Wyoming, had been acquired by the United States by right of prior discovery and occupation as well as by purchase, and its chief importance lay in the fact that the United States had claimed this vast section of country from the discovery of the Columbia River by Captain Gray, May 11, 1792, more than a half century prior to our acquisition of California, and its pioneer missions and settlers were chiefly from the United States.

In the spring of 1849 Bishop Waugh, to whom the Board of Bishops entrusted the details of organization of the "Oregon and California Mission Conference," gave explicit instructions to William Roberts, then superintendent of the Oregon Mission, directing its organization, and accordingly the first conference was held in the chapel of the Oregon Institute in Salem on September 5, 1849. There were present as participants, William Roberts, of the New Jersey Conference; David Leslie, of the Providence Conference; A. F. Waller, of the Tennessee Conference; James H. Wilbur, of the Black River Conference; James Owen, of the Indiana Conference, and William Taylor, of the Baltimore Conference—six men, two from California and four from Oregon, charged with founda-

tion work for the great church of which they were official representatives. Owen and Taylor, of California, were not present; Roberts was elected chairman, and Wilbur secretary; William Helm, an elder from the Kentucky Conference, was readmitted, and J. L. Parrish, who had been received on trial in the Genessee Conference in 1848, was recognized as a probationer in the Oregon and California Mission Conference, and J. E. Parrot, John McKinney and James O. Raynor were admitted on trial. It will be interesting as indicating that they were in the days of small beginnings to note the record of membership at that time. Oregon City reported 30 members and six probationers; Salem circuit 109 members and 25 probationers; Clatsop, eight members and one probationer; an aggregate of 348 members and six probationers; there were fourteen local preachers, and only three churches, one at Oregon City, one at Salem, and one on the Yamhill circuit; there were nine Sabbath schools, with 261 scholars.

At this conference William Roberts was appointed superintendent, and James H. Wilbur and J. L. Parrish were assigned to Oregon City and Portland. For the Salem circuit, William Helm, J. O. Raynor and David Leslie; Yamhill circuit, John McKinney and C. O. Hosford; Mary's River, A. F. Waller and J. E. Parrot; Astoria and Clatsop were to be supplied. The Oregon and California mission conference met one year later, in Oregon City, on September 4, 1850, and there was a reported increase of only 47 members and 20 probationers. James H. Wilbur was appointed to Oregon City and the Columbia River. The third meeting of the conference was held in the Oregon Institute on September 3, 1851, and at that time there were 475 members and 170 probationers. The last and final meeting of the Mission Conference was held at Portland on September 2, 1852, and thereafter, by order of the General Conference held in Boston in May, 1852, California and Oregon were separated, and each state given a separate conference.

Wilbur was a strong man mentally and physically, and he

was not only a forceful preacher, but a great executive. Inured to the hardships and privations of pioneer life, he worked as a common workman in the construction of old Taylor Street Church and in the building of Portland Academy, of which he was the founder. One of the earliest cares of the Methodist Episcopal Church in the Oregon country was the establishment of educational institutions, the oldest one being the Oregon Institute, now Willamette University. It was in the mind of Wilbur to feed the university by the establishment of academies and schools in different parts of the state. With this end in view, and to serve its immediate constituents, he established the Portland Academy from a fund arising from the donation of three blocks of land in this city, one of which was used as a building site, and the other two of which were to constitute an endowment. The Portland Academy was opened in 1851, in charge of Calvin S. Kingsley. Father Wilbur also founded the Umpqua Academy at the town of Wilbur, in Douglas County, Oregon.

In September, 1851, Chapman, Coffin and Lownsdale were the proprietors of the townsite of the city of Portland, and, recognizing the demands for the establishment of educational institutions, donated block 205, upon which the Portland Academy was first built, and block 224, immediately west of this, for this purpose, the deed to which was made to Father Wilbur "in trust to build a male and female seminary thereon and therewith," and it was intended that this should be held in trust for the Methodist Episcopal Church, of the state of Oregon. At that time these blocks were covered with heavy fir timber, and it is recorded that Father Wilbur personally cleared the ground and hewed out of the native fir the timbers for the frame of the building, and assisted in its erection. He solicited subscriptions, advanced and borrowed on his own credit, about \$5,000, and the building was completed November 17, 1851. In June, 1854, the Territorial Legislature incorporated the school, with a board of trustees, of which Wilbur was president; T. J. Dryer, vice-president; C. S. Kingsley, secretary, and W. S. Ladd, treasurer.

Many of the children of the pioneer men and women of those early days were students and graduates of this institution, called Portland Academy and Female Seminary. The building was constructed at the corner of West Park and Jefferson streets, and stood there a monument of the devotion and zeal of these early settlers until within recent years.

The Willamette University was incorporated by act of the Territorial Legislature January 12, 1853, and Wilbur was one of the first trustees. You will recall that the Territorial Legislative Assembly, in 1851, passed an act incorporating the City of Portland, and that the first election was held on April 7, 1851, Hugh D. O'Bryant being elected Mayor by a majority of 4 over J. S. Smith. In June, 1851, the territorial election for Delegate to Congress took place, and as an indication of the population of the city at that time, it may be noted that Joseph Lane received 162 votes, and W. H. Willson 60 votes, or a total of 222 votes.

Taylor Street Church was incorporated under the laws of the territory by special act of the Legislative Assembly on January 26, 1853, although the church had been organized before that time, and the building constructed. The original structure was a frame building fronting on Taylor street, near Third street, and the present brick structure was erected in 1868. It will be remembered that the first Protestant Church erected on the Pacific Coast, from Cape Horn to Bering Strait, was the Methodist Church in Oregon City, begun in 1842, by Waller, was completed in 1844 by Gustavus Hines, and that Bishop E. R. Ames, who visited Portland in March, 1853, was the first bishop who presided over an Oregon conference, held at Salem, March 17 of that year. The superintendents of the Oregon mission were: Jason Lee, 1834-1844; George Gary, 1844-1847; William Roberts, 1847-1849, when the Oregon mission was succeeded by what was called the Oregon and California Mission Conference, under the strong and intelligent hand of William Roberts, who conducted the work of the Oregon and California Mission Conference until it was

merged in the Oregon Conference, in 1853. In all of this work, Wilbur was an active participant; his duty led him into close contact with public affairs, and his activities were not confined entirely to the immediate work of the Christian ministry.

On September 11, 1863, a joint convention of the Legislative Assembly of the State of Oregon was held at Salem, Or., to elect a successor to Benjamin Stark, whose senatorial term would expire March 4, 1864, and Benjamin F. Harding, of Marion County, was chosen. James H. Wilbur was nominated as a candidate before that convention. He was appointed superintendent of teaching at the Yakima Indian Reservation in 1860, and was continuously in the Indian service for about 20 years. From the position of superintendent of teaching he was promoted by President Lincoln to the position of Indian Agent. It will be remembered that the Yakima Indian Reservation was established near old Fort Simcoe, an abandoned military fort, and that the Indians there assembled were from various tribes of Western Washington, but chiefly the Yakimas on the north bank of the Columbia River.

Wilbur had the confidence of the authorities at Washington, and in 1873, during the Modoc Indian war, he was appointed peace commissioner with A. B. Meacham and T. B. Odeneal, charged with the duty of attempting to negotiate a treaty of peace with the Modoc Indians. They were to meet at Linkville, February 15, 1873, but Meacham declined to serve with Odeneal or Wilbur, or either of them, and Jesse Applegate and Samuel Case were appointed in their stead. At that time Wilbur was Indian Agent at Fort Simcoe. Applegate accepted his commission, but subsequently resigned, and he characterized the peace commission as "an expensive blunder." It is enough to say that it failed in its mission, and there are those who believe that if Wilbur had been allowed to serve with Meacham, his knowledge of Indian character would have enabled him to negotiate the peace treaty, and would have avoided the subsequent treachery of the Modocs and the murder of General Edward R. S. Canby.

Wilbur devoted himself to the Indian service for about 20 years, and as it seems to me, made a sacrifice which not only did him an injustice, but deprived the commonwealth of a larger service which he might have rendered if he had continued in his work as a great preacher and constructive builder of Christian civilization among his own people. At this distance, and from this point of view, missionary efforts of the early churches, both Protestant and Catholic, seem to have been devoid of permanent results. Jason Lee and his associates, as early as 1834, were inspired with the purpose to convert to Christianity the Indians in this great, unsettled and undeveloped region. The Methodist Church for a generation devoted its great energy to this work. A like ambition inspired the mission of Dr. Whitman, Father DeSmet, Archbishop Blanchet and other devoted men, both Protestant and Catholic. It may be that their work in some measure acted as a bridge over which the early pioneers could pass to a ripper and better civilization. These missionaries to the Indians, in anticipation of the probable failure of their work in that direction, turned their energies toward the establishment of educational institutions and of local churches for the development of our own people, and in this work Wilbur was a pioneer builder of strength and character. The foundations laid by him in this city in the building of Taylor Street Church were broad and deep, and the influence of what he did in the early '50s, in the work of his hands here, far outreaches any work that he did or could have done in his self-immolation in the service of a passing and perishing race. The American Indian, while uncivilized, was not entirely without religion. While it is true that he had no special knowledge of religion as we understand it, and especially of the Christian religion, he was not barren of all religious instincts and traditions, and was not entirely without guidance. The work done in his behalf has been transitory and without permanent effect. This, perhaps, could not be foreseen, and yet, as civilization has extended its influence over that vast Indian territory which at one time embraced the

entire United States, it will be seen that the Indian race itself has vanished, and that but a fragment here and there now remains. Wilbur, when he retired from work among his own people and devoted himself exclusively to the Indian service, was in the prime of a vigorous manhood, and had not yet reached the age of 50 years. If he had remained in the work of Christian education and in the work of the ministry among his own people, it is impossible now to say what might have been the record of his successful life. There are men and women still living, here and elsewhere, who were co-workers with him, and who testify to the sterling qualities with which he was endowed. He was a type of man devoted to the ministry of the church, that has in large measure passed away. In his day he had much to do of detail, of preparation, of control, that could not now and ought not to be done by his successors. These men were forerunners of a different era, and did the work which times and conditions required them to do. They were all men of strong natures, vigorous in thought, forceful in debate, aggressive along all lines, and unused to the gentler methods and diplomacy of the modern pulpit. The work which was here to be done required such men, it was foundation work, under trying and unfavorable conditions, and they had the time and opportunity which does not come to men of the present day. But few of their illustrious number survive the cares and marks of time. Among that number are Thomas F. Royal and John Flinn, and there may be others. Father Flinn—hale and hearty at the age of more than 90 years—still goes in and out among us in mental and physical vigor. You will recall that the Taylor Street Church was organized in 1848, and the building was constructed in 1850. Father Flinn delivered the second discourse in the old church building. He came from the Maine Conference, and as early as September 3, 1851, became a member of the Oregon and California Mission Conference.

Among the contemporaries of Father Wilbur and Father Flinn in these earlier days were T. H. Pearne, Isaac Dillon,

J. S. Smith, John W. Miller and N. Doane, all of whom were men of power and influence and of the same general type. These were the days when an empire was in process of building. The Oregon territory originally was divided into four districts or counties—Tuality, Yamhill, Champoeg and Clackamas. Tuality County was first established July 5, 1843, and comprised at that time all of the territory west of the Willamette and north of the Yamhill River, extending to the Pacific Ocean on the west and as far north as the north boundary line of the United States, which President Polk and his party claimed was 54:40. On September 4, 1849, its name was change from Tuality to Washington County, and Portland, which was founded by A. L. Lovejoy and F. W. Pettygrove, in 1845, was first incorporated in January, 1851, and remained within the limits of Washington County until the organization of Multnomah County, on December 22, 1854. At that time there was no newspaper or other publication in what is now Multnomah County, and it was not until December 4, 1850, that Thomas J. Dryer published the first newspaper adn named it The Weekly Oregonian. The Daily Oregonian was not published until February 4, 1861, and The Sunday Oregonian was first published on the 4th day of December, 1881.

The first school of public instruction in this city was opened in a little frame building on Front street, at the corner of Taylor, and was constructed by Job McNamee, the father of Mrs. E. J. Northrup, who, with her family, were at one time members of Taylor Street Church. The first school teacher was Dr. Ralph Wilcox, of New York, and he had under his charge about a dozen pupils. He was also the first physician coming to this city, and it will be remembered that for many years he was Clerk of the United States Circuit Court for this district and Speaker of the House of Representatives in the Territorial Legislature of 1848.

Recurring to the statement that Wilbur was nominated in the joint convention of the Legislative Assembly, September 11, 1863, as one of the candidates for the office of United

States Senator, it is worthy of historical record that in the early political history of this state there were strong and influential men identified with the Methodist Church who were more or less active in the political forces of the state. In this same Joint Assembly Thomas H. Pearne, who was a distinguished editor of the *Pacific Christian Advocate*, was also mentioned as a candidate for the Senate, and had the support of Addison C. Gibbs, who, on the preceding day, had been inaugurated as Governor of the state, and who was also a member of the Methodist Church; J. S. Smith, who was elected to Congress as a Democrat in June, 1868, was a preacher in the Methodist Church under the mission conference presided over by William Roberts, and was admitted to that conference in 1851-2. He also was a co-worker with Wilbur in all the activities of the church in this section. George Abernethy, the first Governor of Oregon, was a member of the Methodist Church at Oregon City, and assisted in building the first Protestant Church erected on the Pacific Coast, which is still standing at Oregon City. William Roberts was the administrative officer and active member of the Methodist Episcopal Church in this jurisdiction for many years during these pioneer times. He was an ideal executive and a fit co-worker with James H. Wilbur. The one was skillful to plan, the other strong to execute, and to these two men, in large measure, is due the successful issue of the preliminary work entrusted to their care.

The contemporaries of Wilbur profoundly admired the man, and in this regard he had the love and affection of men of all classes. In his zeal and constructive ability he has been regarded as the Jesuit of Methodism in the Northwest. If he had lived in the days of Ignatius Loyola, the Spanish soldier and prelate, he would have taken the three vows of that great order founded by him, and devoted himself to a life of poverty, chastity and obedience in the service of his Master. H. K. Hines, for some time editor of the *Pacific Christian Advocate*, who delivered a memorial discourse at the funeral of Father

Wilbur at Taylor Street Church, October 30, 1887, speaking of him, said: "So long had he been a chief, if not the chief, figure in our Methodism on this coast, that it is not at all strange that his loss is so widely felt and unusually mourned. His place in our church work was unique; and perhaps it might be said there was place for but one Father Wilbur in our work. His was a history and a work that can never be repeated, nor even imitated on this coast. He was essentially and by nature a pioneer."

Summarizing what Dr. Hines has so well said of the man whom he knew, it may be said that Father Wilbur as an administrative and executive officer had rare discernment and force. His address was familiar, his carriage imposing, and his presence indicative of great will force. He was benevolent to a fault, and for many years prior to his death it is said that he disbursed about \$3,000 a year in benevolences, although he was a man of small fortune. By his will he bequeathed \$10,000 to the Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, \$10,000 to the Church Extension Society, and \$10,000 to the Freedman's Aid Society, and the remainder of his estate, amounting to about \$17,000, over and above these specific bequests, was bequeathed to Willamette University.

Speaking of his work among the Indians, Dr. Hines said:

"Twenty-two years of the life of James H. Wilbur were breathed out into what was such a moral desolation when he and his companions went there: Lost some would say, in the all-absorbing and unresponsive soul of paganism." And, while Dr. Hines dissents from this estimate of the sacrifice which Wilbur had made, it is debatable whether such a man should have made so great a sacrifice. A sense of natural justice and desire to bring light to a race in spiritual darkness, would prompt such men as Wilbur to give the best of their lives to such work. It is not true, as Dr. Hines has said, that "very much that was greatest in the character and most widely influential in the life and reputation of Mr. Wilbur himself, was the fruit and growth of that work and these years of conse-

cration to the redemption of the Indian race." This may in part be conceded to be true, and yet the biographer and historian who not only narrates events but seeks to discover the philosophy and purposes of the acts of men and their influence beyond their times, must regret that the labors of so great a man should have been so long and so exclusively devoted to a race that he could not help into a permanent and enduring civilization. Here and there a remnant of that race yet remains, and its untamed blood lives its nature and instinct, in a few strong members, but the severe chronicler of the times must attest the truth of history that in large degree the work of evangelism among the native races has not measured up to the expectation of the brave men and women who have sacrificed so much of life and of treasure and labor in their behalf. And the chief distinction that will be noted in the life and work of James H. Wilbur will be that upon virgin soil, in the unbroken forests of the Oregon country, with his own hands, he laid the foundation of Taylor Street Methodist Church, and like institutions and influences in other sections of this then new country, and that he here began a work which, in the circle of its influence and in the effectiveness of its power, will be eternal. What he did here and elsewhere along these lines was done with no thought of distinction or enduring fame. Longfellow says that "the talent of success is nothing more than doing what you can do well, without a thought of fame," and true greatness takes no notice of what the future may have in store for those who achieve, and is not troubled about the memorial tablet. Wilbur lived a life of usefulness and struggle, but in and through it all there was purpose and achievement. Daniel Deronda, at the end of that tragic story so well portrayed by George Eliot, says: "What makes life dreary is the want of motive; but once beginning to act with that penitential, loving purpose you have in your mind, there will be unexpected satisfactions—there will be newly-opening needs continually coming to carry you on from day to day. You will find your life growing like a

plant." And so it is that these early pioneer preachers, of whom Wilbur was a distinguished type, were placed in the way of empire building, and the motive which most strongly impelled them to action was that they might establish a Christian civilization in this distant and remote section of their country, and that they might set in motion forces that would endure forever. They were men without fortune, and inured to the hardships and privations of a new country; they were poorly compensated in money, and at times overwhelmed by apparently insurmountable difficulties. A mark of a great mind is the renewal of effort at each succeeding failure, and so it was in the case of Wilbur and men of his type, although they met with difficulties and oftentimes failed to accomplish results desired, each failure quickened their ambition to a higher and better effort.

Confucius says: "Our greatest glory is not, in never falling, but in rising every time we fall." This is, indeed, pagan philosophy, but none the less Christian, for such has been the mainspring of that effort which has extended the religion of Jesus of Nazareth from a Roman province to the conquest of the world.